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SUBJECT: ISTANBUL MAY DAY 2007

REF: ISTANBUL 358

This message was coordinated with Embassy Ankara.

¶1. (SBU) Following Sunday's "largest ever" demonstration in Turkey (reftel), a union-inspired crowd today took to the streets to hold traditional May Day demonstrations. Depending on where one started the day, the morning commute was either easier than normal or nearly impossible as police tried to keep demonstrators from reaching what had been the traditional May Day gathering place in Taksim Square where a demonstration 30 years ago ended with deaths. This year, the Istanbul Governor's office denied protest permits for Taksim Square, consistent with recent practice. While most union leaders agreed to hold the annual rally on the Asian side of the city, the leadership of the Confederation of Revolutionary Workers' Unions (DISK) opted to defy the ban on meeting in Taksim. By mid-day, police had managed to keep all but approximately 1000 demonstrators from reaching the square by curtailing subway, bus and ferry service as well as using water cannon and tear gas.

¶2. (SBU) May Day comes on the heels of Istanbul's huge demonstration Sunday, April 29, when citizens turned out in force in support of Turkey's secular nature (reftel). In contrast to Sunday's peaceful, festive event featuring vastly greater numbers of people, today's gatherings in Istanbul were marred by violence when demonstrators determined to reach a traditional May Day protest point met police just as determined to prevent them from gathering in the unauthorized location. Istanbul police typically react strenuously to unauthorized demonstrations. International Women's Day 2005 was marked by significant violence as police attempted to disperse an unauthorized demonstration in Kadikoy.

¶3. (SBU) Embassy Ankara labor contacts representing the two largest labor confederations, Turk-Is and Hak-Is, did not agree with DISK's decision to press ahead with a demonstration in Taksim Square. Osman Yildiz, Hak-Is' head of international relations, said given the high degree of tension already prevalent in the country tied to the presidential election process, DISK's decision was "not correct." Yildiz said that according to contacts of his within the labor movement, detainees will likely be released this evening. Yildirim Koc, an official with Yol-Is, a union affiliated with Turk-Is, similarly criticized DISK's "stubbornness" in insisting on marching to Taksim. However, Koc, whose daughter was among the DISK marchers this afternoon, said that the security forces acted "intolerantly" especially in comparison to their attitude during the massive April 29 rally in Istanbul.

BACKGROUND

13. (SBU) On May 1, 1977, 36 were killed when gunfire from a hotel rooftop on Taksim Square triggered a stampede. Twenty-nine of the victims died in the stampede and the remainder were killed by gunfire. Reports at the time indicate panic grew as police attempted to channel the crowd down narrow streets. It was never determined who opened fire. Police claimed socialist groups were responsible, but no one was ever charged with the shooting.
JONES